Countering the attack on NSW wilderness and protected areas

by Keith Muir

Abstract

Since the 2006 National Wilderness Conference there has been significant progress in wilderness, wild river and national park reservation in NSW. When the O’Farrell Government was swept to power in March 2011, however, the Shooters and Fishers Party strengthened their hold on the balance of power in the Legislative Council, with dire consequences for the natural environment, tourism and national parks.

The wild places of New South Wales, like those in Victoria and Queensland, are suffering from a redistribution of political power toward those whose interests are resource extraction and property development. This change is producing deregulation, euphemistically called ‘cutting green tape’.

The O’Farrell Government has opened NSW national parks to hunting and is cutting public involvement in planning and focusing on growth. Proposals for logging and grazing in national parks are even being discussed in an Upper House Inquiry into public lands.

Nature is under attack. Conservationists need to redouble efforts to passionately re-engage with the public to support the enduring values of national parks and inspire community-based defence of natural areas.

Introduction

Until very recently, the most remarkable thing about NSW protected areas was the dedication of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to nature-focused reserve management. There were only a few notable exceptions, such as the ski villages in Kosciuszko National Park, the historic infrastructure at Hill End Historic site and Royal National Park, and more recently, visitor facilities in Ku-ring-gai Chase and Sydney Harbour National Parks.

National parks in NSW are publicly owned and government managed but are increasingly expected to pay their way. These changes are due to diminishing government funding, and changes to legislation and policy that regulate visitor use.

NSW national parks were recently estimated to receive over 38 million visits each year (Morgan, R., 2009) by tourists and members of the local community. All who visited parks were recreating, enjoying and learning about important cultural and natural heritage. Nearly all visitors were at least gaining a sense of the wild and experiencing some elements of unspoilt nature.

To support such levels of visitation at least a billion dollars had been invested over many decades in low-key facilities such as walking tracks, camping areas, lookouts and picnic areas. These facilities were maintained and enhanced through an annual Government expenditure of over $70 million dollars (DECCW, 11/11/2010). Environment groups support continued improvement of these low-key facilities for national park visitors and better promotion to encourage appropriate use, combined with
off-park accommodation and other services which will support local economies while reducing adverse visitation impacts on national parks.

Since the Fifth National Wilderness Conference in 2006 significant progress has been made toward nature conservation goals. The Mummel Gulf, Yengo and Curacabundi wilderness areas and forty six wilderness additions to existing areas have been declared over a total area of 228,459 hectares. Two wild rivers have been created within national parks, the Colo and the Grose Rivers, bringing the total to six protected. And on May 19, 2010 a new 107,000 hectare river red gum reserve system was proclaimed in the Riverina, a bioregion that was previously almost devoid of reserves. One other significant advance is important to the Colong Foundation, the reservation of the iconic Mugii Murum-ban State Conservation Area in the Gardens of Stone region. This 3,650 hectare reserve was gazetted after a twenty-five year conservation effort and was secured just before the previous Labor administration was swept from office in March last year.

The progress towards enhancing ecologically sustainable visitor management of parks and reserves over the last six years, on the other hand, has been unimpressive. Despite major policy changes and recent efforts to make national park management more visitor-focused, including providing for on-park accommodation and the needs of higher-impact users, park managers report that visitation is declining.

Since the O’Farrell Government was swept to power in NSW on 25th March 2011, the Dharawal and Berowra Valley reserves have been upgraded to national park status, but with the Shooters and Fishers Party holding the balance of power in the Legislative Council, the new agenda for “appropriate” visitor use is becoming distorted in unexpected directions.

Nearly everyone recognises the need for society to achieve ecological sustainability, but then goes on to deny, often in the same breath, that their actions have much of an impact upon the planet. This is the case whether a massive tourist corporation or avid cycling and bushwalking enthusiasts are involved. This denial of impact may have contributed to the poor compromises made by Environment Ministers in the last six years on visitor use policy. When it comes to the crunch, our political representatives generally tend to put our needs before those of nature, even in national parks. So is this recent policy trend, the move away from nature-focused park management, paradoxically the reason for the decline in park visitation or is it associated with recent legislative action taken by the Shooters and Fishers Party?

Although we may be reluctant to admit it openly, the majority of us know that to protect wilderness and national parks society must place the needs of nature before our wishes for private coastal eco-resorts, glamour camping, motor sport rallies, horse riding, off-road trail blazing and hunting. This surely has been our very first baby step toward ecological sustainability. Yet it was made way back in 1934, when the Blue Gum Forest was saved from the axe by a fund raising campaign during the Great Depression. So why now, after all these years, are we in NSW turning our back on the national park vision of nature-focused management?

**Gruen Planet – can national parks be bought and sold?**

The reversal of policy direction arose not unsurprisingly from the well-heeled end of the tourism lobby. The Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) using some deft marketing techniques sought to influence politicians and establish a policy segue for building ‘eco-resorts’ in national parks. Certain park user groups are also following their political leads to gain more access to remote national parks and wilderness, regardless of the damage they may cause.
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Parks have been misrepresented by these users and the TTF as “locked up” and that view accords with pro-business Government policies to double tourism by 2020. The subsequent policy changes, however, have done little to increase high-quality, heritage-focused park visitation which benefits most by means of well thought out, low-key facilities made available to all.

Market theory that carves up national parks into various customer sectors to maximise product and sales is an inappropriate approach to visitor management. Policy makers who wish to ensure social equity of access and visitor use remains nature-focused need to think carefully about applying user pays models to national parks (Hughes and Carlsen, 2011).

Misapplication of the Private-Public Partnership Model

A 2008 tourist report from John O’Neil, the Chairman of Events NSW, commissioned by the then Premier, Morris Iemma, recommended that national parks should ‘sustain and enhance assets instead of focusing on protecting them from people’. This heavily-loaded directive for park managers to become less risk averse was followed up with more detailed recommendations from a Taskforce on Tourism and National Parks. This Taskforce proposed more commercial facilities in and access to national parks. This commercial policy framework was then adopted by the NSW Government in December 2008.

These park development policies were based, at least in part, on the false premise that privately funded high-end facilities can increase park visitation. At that time, discussions with the then NPWS revealed a second rationale for increased park development. These development polices would generate revenue for conservation programs through the program of private development (NPWS Tourism and Partnerships Branch head, pers. comm., 14 July 2009). These two arguments were actually those used by the powerful TTF, but even their extensive research had not produced a single Australian example of any on-park tourism operation providing significant net revenue to support conservation.

The TTF’s version of ‘nature tourism’ is always that something has to be built. Their constituency is big developers, transport operators and hotel chains, as underscored by their annual membership fee of $27,000 per company. The TTF are the lobby behind a multi-state push to ‘open up’ National Parks for tourist development, under the guise of this being good for conservation. The TTF have won the first round, amending park legislation in several states to allow for high-end, high-impact development in protected areas. This campaign agenda is a demonstration of TTF’s political power, but one that has no apparent economic or other rational basis. Even the lease agreement for the 800-bed Snowy Mountains ski resort in Perisher that was approved in 2009 hasn’t gone ahead. The developer of this large resort wasn’t allowed under the development agreement to sell off the apartments as real estate, and without that huge cash boost, the proposal wasn’t economically viable.

Professor Ralf Buckley, director of the International Centre for Ecotourism Research at Griffith University, believes that current evidence disproves TTF’s private-public partnership theory. His data reveals that “proposals for upmarket exclusive tourist accommodation within NSW national parks do not fit any of the successful models. The closest analogues are historic hotels in US national parks, and recent lodges in South African national parks, and neither of these have made net contributions to conservation or parks budgets” (4 March, 2009).

The potential contribution of ‘high yield’ resort visitors to grow park visitation is inconsequential as the great bulk of park visitors are not interested in paying premium prices. Even the modest cabin-style accommodation facilities at Merry Beach in Murramarang National Park are not guaranteed sufficient patronage for financial success. The owners of this resort, Mariner Leisure Management Pty Limited, were placed into receivership in May 2009, being unable to pay back a $30 million loan to the
The Colong Foundation for Wilderness

Commonwealth Bank. At about the same time, the Merry Beach resort was alienated from the national park, turning the public’s wonderful national park beach front into a very valuable private asset that would have been very handy for a failed company seeking to restart itself.

The laissez faire approach to on-park tourism is further explained by TRC Tourism. According to this international tourism consultancy company, eco-resort investors will not respond well if sites in national parks are chosen for them. Investors prefer to drive site selection and the chosen site needs to have the “wow factor”. Further, protected natural and cultural areas that are part of an established tourism destination or tourism corridor will be far more appealing to investors (TRC, September 2012). In other words, private interests want to be allowed to pick the eyes out of national parks and don’t like the identification of investor ready sites, as applied in Western Australian national parks, and beginning to be applied to NSW parks under the national landscapes program (DECCW, 2011).

Such “exploit the honey-pot” logic led to a holiday cabins proposal on the mid-north coast at Trial Bay, just behind the fore dune in the Arakoon State Conservation Area and near to a successful off-park eco-resort. The owner of the off-park Trial Bay Eco Tourist Park, Tony Mayne, believes his eco-resort would have been “cannibalised” by building resorts in the nearby park. The Nationals Leader, Andrew Stoner said that “Instead of focusing on protecting the unique coastal environment at South West Rocks, the Wildlife Service has been directed to become a revenue-raising venture”. For a cabin development to spoil the most beautiful part of a coastal park and destroy a nearby resort owner’s profits on private land is, as Mr Stoner said, a “crazy” idea (Sun-Herald, 7/6/2009, pg 30).

If business can muscle in on a successful trade and get a “wow factor” site in a park, and the Government is agreeable, then yes, investors can successfully develop tourist accommodation inside national parks. This sort of shameful deal-making degrades parks and compromises local tourism.

In reference to the NSW Planning Green Paper (2012), the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) warned that the proposed flexible planning laws could breed corruption. Such laws would be a perfect fit with private resort proposals that virtually alienate state-controlled coastal national park land. ICAC warned that introducing such flexibility into the planning system “will create a corruption risk, especially when combined with the potential for proponents to obtain huge windfall profits through obtaining an approval” (SMH, 3/10/2012, pg 4).

Long-standing Australian Conservation Foundation Councillor, Dr Geoff Mosley (2011) believes that Governments are easy targets for park development interests because of their business oriented philosophies.

Dr Mosley argues that conservationists need to ensure that the public appreciates the distinct recreational and educational roles of national parks so that business interests, like the Tourism and Transport Forum, are unable to capture Government support with their propaganda. This campaign emphasis he believes would also counter the mainstream media’s focus on commercial travel that dilutes conservation efforts to redirect tourism development away from national parks.

Local conservationists agree with this emphasis. Robin Mosman (2004), an influential past-president of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society believes “Parks are constantly under pressure from commercial interests, and it is only the democratic weight of public opinion and strength of the environment movement that will preserve them for the people of NSW, to whom they really belong".
Big money power

The approval of the Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort on the western side of the Blue Mountains offers no better example of the pressure on national parks from powerful tourism industry interests. The Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort was the very first ‘concept plan’ proposal under the notorious Part 3A planning law, a law that gave too much power to the Planning Minister and which slashed green tape. The initial ‘plan’ placed most of the resort buildings on freehold land when it went on public exhibition just before Christmas 2005. Then just before Christmas 2006, a variation of the ‘plan’ went on exhibition that relocated the proposed resort into the World Heritage listed Wollemi National Park.

The amended ‘plan’ did not even indicate the boundary of the national park let alone explain why the 1,000 hectares of freehold land available for the proposed resort were so unsuitable that it had to go onto adjoining national park land. Being a Part 3A variation of an approval it too was approved, with no possibility of a legal challenge to that 2007 decision.

After half a dozen tourism reports, inquiries and reviews, and the establishment of the Emirates in the Wolgan Valley, the NSW Government took further action to open up parks. Incredibly even after the TTF succeeded in getting NSW national park laws weakened, the tourism lobby still blames the delays in the approval of this blundered resort development on conservationists and demands yet more green tape to be cut (Bolt, A. 2012).

National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (Visitors and Tourists) Act 2010

In June 2010 the then Environment Minister, Frank Sartor, passed legislation to broaden Ministerial powers to grant exclusive, private development rights for accommodation and other tourist infrastructure in NSW National Parks. Respected barrister Tim Robertson SC, believes this legislation overturned 20 years of case law and destroyed the ‘delicate balance that the Courts have struck, which gives primacy to the conservation objectives of the Act’ (Robertson, T., 2010).

In addition to the previous leasing or licensing powers over national park land, concessions can now be granted for facilities and amenities for tourists not associated with their accommodation, such as retail outlets ‘commensurate with the needs of the area in which that outlet is located’, ‘restaurants and other food outlets’, ‘cultural institutions, including museums and galleries’, as well as enabling activities of a ‘sporting, recreational, educational, or cultural nature’, ‘the hosting of conferences’ and the provision of facilities for those purposes, and ‘to provide residential accommodation to facilitate the provision of services to tourists’ (Robertson, T., 2010).

For the first time, the 2010 National Park legislation allows commercial tours into wilderness. This law also permits long-term park closures for private events and the issue of leases for unlimited periods, even for 100 years or more.

Recent park development plans

The Draft Australia's Coastal Wilderness National Landscape Tourism Master Plan (2009) identifies four “product enhancement focal points” on the South Coast: the Pender’s site in Mimosa Rocks National Park; and Green Cape, Bittangabee and Mowarry Point in Ben Boyd National Park. A bed and breakfast is to be located in the old Myer house at Pender’s, which is situated on southernmost headland of Wapengo Estuary (Birthy Inlet). Even to establish a low-scale adaptive reuse B&B resort at Penders, fire regulations require the removal of forty eucalypt trees, and the access road to be widened and upgraded. A half million dollar Government grant under the Heritage Assets Revitalisation Program (HARP) was provided to ensure the resort is opened for business this...
Christmas. The Myer house will then be available only to elite park visitors who can afford the $5000 per week price tag.

Dr Kevin Tolhurst, an expert witness at the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday bushfires with over 25 years in fire management, has criticised the Victorian Government’s national park tourism policies on just this point. Dr Tolhurst explained that commercial tourist development in national parks requires more intensive fire management:

“We’ve got a relatively recent example with what happened in Tidal River in the Wilsons Promontory area; having those facilities in the parks actually compromises a whole prescribed burning program... we need to come to a clear picture as to why we have national parks, and how much we expect to be able to develop those areas to improve our economic return from those areas. Primarily they are there to protect the natural values of the areas... Campers, walkers, you can close the park - but if you’ve got facilities in there worth millions of dollars,... the facilities will still be there and that will put a lot of pressure on the fire authorities to protect them” (Tolhurst, K., 2012).

In addition to the Pender proposal, accommodation developments are proposed for Mowarry Point, Bittangabee Bay and Green Cape outside the light-station complex on the Light to Light Walk. The Office of Environment and Heritage recently advertised a proposal to lease Ben Boyd National Park’s Mowarry Point and Bittangabee Bay as part of the commercialisation of this walk (SMH advert. of lease notice, 3/10/2012).

The potential lease sites both are almost a hectare in size and have access to car parking. The November 2010 park management plan allows for these developments and reversed the closure of the 4WD road between Leather Jacket Bay and Mowarry Point proposed in the previous plan. Ongoing vehicle access to Mowarry Point carpark would permit vehicle access for the proposed accommodation facilities on the Point. This vehicle access arrangement necessitates duplication of the coastal walking track to Leather Jacket Bay that could otherwise use the closed road, magnifying the environmental impacts in sensitive coastal vegetation.

Further, the lease is being offered to Austwide Projects Ltd, a tertiary training company with no experience in eco-tourism and park visitor guiding. Austwide Projects Ltd does, however, have experience in training for hospitality services. So the character of the proposed tourism product could be influenced by the experience of the proposed lessee. Under these arrangements upmarket, high-priced glamour camping for visitors could be proposed, using Bedouin-style tents, fine food and wine.

Meanwhile the substitution of government TAFE Certificate courses with private Certificate courses, like those provided by Austwide Projects may also impact upon park management. Courses in Outdoor Recreation at Blue Mountains TAFE at Wentworth Falls are being shut down due to NSW state government budget cuts. These public TAFE courses have been producing qualified wilderness guides and outdoor professionals for the eco-tourism and outdoor education industries for decades.

At the northern end of the Light to Light walk, the proposed Green Cape lighthouse development could put at risk the population of Spotted-Tailed Quolls found there (Canberra Times, June 7, 2010). The public investment in this speculative tourist track and accommodation development comes at the expense of the nature conservation budget. In his legal advice of June 9th, 2010, Mr Tim Robertson SC, explained some of the adverse aspects of development in national parks:

“As everyone knows, tourist facilities usually involve permanent development, not readily reversible [development] like camping areas and narrow tracks. It is difficult to envisage how a tourist development as is commonly understood could coalesce with an objective to promote or conserve biodiversity, especially over time (how can a tourist development whose
impacts are only perceived after approval be reversed?). A tourist resort requires power, water and sewage facilities, increasing the footprint of development in remote areas for many kilometres.”

These concerns are echoed in Australia’s Wilderness Coast Tourism Master Plan. The Plan describes these environmental impacts politely as “Site Challenges: access for additional accommodation developments and services (power, water etc.).” These challenges can increase the development costs, even before a sod is turned. This then creates economic forces that drive the scale of the accommodation development to be much larger than would be needed for an economic return if these tourist facilities were located close-by in the villages of Pambula, Eden and Wonboyn. Fortunately as this national park development is Government subsidised, these upscale development pressures are lessened.

A further example of inappropriate visitor facility development is found in the 16,200 hectare Green Gully addition to the Macleay Gorges Wilderness, near Walcha. In 2010 the then Environment Minister, Frank Sartor, ruled out an Office of Environment and Heritage plan to use three old huts in the area as a base for helicopter tourism and instead directed that the wilderness be declared without any holes cut in it.

Despite this direction and before Green Gully was protected under the Wilderness Act, 1987, and without public consultation, the Office of Environment and Heritage refurbished the three huts by adding cooking facilities and sleeping quarters. New outdoor picnic tables, paved areas and fire places were built for the paying guests and utensils and crockery provided. Extensive signage was also installed along the “Green Gully Track” contrary to Wilderness Policy.

The new facilities are not only contrary to the self-reliant recreation management principles of the Wilderness Act, but by encouraging paying guests not to carry tents and cooking utensils on a wilderness walk with long days between huts, the Park managers are also ignoring essential bush safety practices. Any accident will drive home this lack of professionalism and scrutiny of the development in the worst way imaginable.

The Green Gully property was purchased with the help of a public fundraising campaign that raised over $170,000. It was the largest acquisition made by the Dunphy Wilderness Fund, established by former Premier Bob Carr to commemorate the conservation achievements of Milo Dunphy. These accommodation facilities are an appalling example of on-park tourism in declared wilderness. The development dishonours the memory of Mr Dunphy and the donors to the Wilderness Fund, and actively promotes public confusion over wilderness management.

The adverse impact of the so-called “recreational hunting” lobby on park tourism

The Federal Environment Minister, the Hon Tony Burke addressing the Sydney Institute on 20th July 2011 said “an area, once protected, usually has the principle apply that there shall be ‘no backward steps’. New areas for National Parks frequently have existing commercial uses that are phased out or scaled back over time. But once those commercial uses end we don’t talk about going back on it.”

As Minister Burke went on to explain, this long-standing political consensus on the management of national parks, wilderness areas and nature reserves is now being eroded. In NSW, once the Shooters Party had gained a balance of power in the Upper House in 2002, the previous Labor administration began heading away from nature conservation, as illustrated by the passage of a law that gave shooters executive powers over hunting in state forests through the Game Council. They made a further retrograde step in 2009 when over 1,036 hectares of World Heritage value bushland in
the Bargo State Conservation Area were revoked for construction of a $5.1 million dollar tax-payer funded regional shooting complex adjoining the Nattai National Park (Keneally, K., 2009).

The political influence of Shooters and Fishers Party has already damaged nature conservation programs and policies in this state. The current NSW Government is even more dependent on the Shooters and Fishers Party, as the Greens are a “bridge too far” in policy terms, especially for the Nationals. The Shooters and Fishers Party can now successfully negotiate politically difficult policies as it can withdraw support from key elements of the NSW Government’s legislative program at any time. In these circumstances, the Shooters and Fishers Party is seeking more park access for shooters, bike and horse riders. It is also Party policy to open up national parks to logging, fire wood collection and domestic stock grazing (Shooters and Fishers Party, 2011 a and b).

As a result of the Shooters’ political power, NSW national parks will become ‘hunting public land’ by January 2013, and hunters in national parks will be exempt from interference by law, forcing the Government to break its no hunting in national parks election promise. Walkers who stray into park land that has been so designated could be guilty of interference while at the same time risk being shot. Shooters claim to be “conservation hunters” but seek to maintain sustainable populations of game species to shoot (e.g. deer), which is completely the wrong motivation for the effective control of feral animals. Other so-called conservation measures of the Shooters and Fishers Party (2012) include hunting native ducks and the introduction of new exotic pest birds, such as the Californian Quail. Such initiatives create public confusion and anxiety regarding parks and wildlife management.

Ms Carmel Tebbutt, the Labor Member for Marrickville speaking against the hunting in parks legislation said: “Opening our national parks to recreational hunters is a very real threat to public safety” (Hansard L.A., 21/6/12). Park rangers also overwhelmingly oppose hunting in NSW national parks and many believe it poses a serious risk to human lives, as well as killing native animals and damaging existing feral animal control programs (B. Cubby, SMH 15/9/12).

Tourism has been the first fatality of hunting in national parks. The risks to public safety from stray bullets and rogue hunters have discouraged park visitors, and as previously stated, park managers have reported a drop in park visitors from previous years.

Public perceptions of national parks are further adversely affected by the Shooters and Fishers Party constantly ventilating the incorrect view that NSW parks are degraded, full of feral animals and would be better managed if their natural resources were exploited. For example, the Upper House Inquiry into the Management of Public Lands established by the Shooters and Fishers Party has collected submissions from organisations, such as the Australian Environment Foundation, in support of parks and reserves becoming multiple use zones for logging and grazing, as well as conservation. At the Inquiry’s public forum in Deniliquin, Councillor O’Neill (2012) described the River Red Gum National Parks as a “tinder box and a harbour for all manner of pests and vermin”. His General Manager, Mr Graham (2012) added that Wakool Shire Council “is of the view that our national parks, State parks and forests should be managed for multiple benefits and uses, including timber production, conservation, tourism and recreation.”

**Exclusive access detracts from nature-focused park management**

In addition to tourism accommodation, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has sought to broaden the appeal of national parks by catering to a broader range of recreation pursuits. By becoming less risk averse in relation to environment impacts of user activities, the NPWS believes it can introduce more opportunities for activities such as horse riders and mountain bike riders, as well as for off-road vehicle users. These park user groups are establishing partnerships through policy
and memoranda of understanding that dictate or circumvent long-standing nature-focused park management for their benefit.

Under instructions from the NSW Coalition, via a 2006 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between horse riders and the NSW Liberal Party and the NSW Nationals, horse riding is being allowed into wilderness. A three year trail of horse riding in a wilderness inside the Kosciuszko National Park is part of a new horse riding policy developed due to this MoU. This concession is in addition to the 3,000 kilometres of trails currently available to horse riders that are already causing damage to the park estate. The Bicentennial National Trail is also available to horse riders and is located on a dedicated easement that cuts through half a dozen declared wilderness areas in NSW.

The NPWS has apparently forgotten that wilderness describes a specific approach to conservation land management, with the governing intent being to minimize disturbance of an area. The management principles of the *Wilderness Act* specify:

‘A wilderness area shall be managed so as:

a) to restore (if applicable) and to protect the unmodified state of the area and its plants and animal communities;

b) to preserve the capacity of the area to evolve in the absence of significant human interference; and

c) to permit opportunities for solitude and appropriate self-reliant recreation.’

A 1999 NPWS position paper on the Bicentennial National Trail (BNT) states: ‘The Service considers horse riding is incompatible with principles a) and b) and does not fulfil the definition of appropriate self-reliant recreation. Horse riding is not regarded as self-reliant because the means of travel is not powered by the person and is regarded as inappropriate because it is not undertaken within any formal wilderness areas in Australia and the impacts generally degrade wilderness areas.’ An even earlier NPWS position paper on horse riding in wilderness stated that ‘Horse riding is one such activity that is incompatible with the protection and management of wilderness values, and therefore is excluded from these areas.’ … ‘From experience throughout NSW, elsewhere in Australia, and overseas some of the principal environmental impacts of horse riding can be summarised as follows:

- destruction of vegetation caused by horses trampling plants through wandering off trails or widening existing trails;

- accelerated erosion of tracks, especially on highly erodible soils, through loosening and breaking up the trail surface by horses’ hooves leaving an unstable surface that may be readily removed by water during the next rain;

- sedimentation due to accelerated trail erosion, causing siltation of water courses, impeding the flow of water, adversely effecting aquatic flora and fauna, and encouraging weed growth;

- altered watercourse patterns where a proliferating track network may impose an altered or entirely new drainage pattern on the natural system and interrupt water flow, which can effect downslope vegetation communities significantly;

- increased rates/risks of weed introduction and spread;
• greater access via track proliferation; the number of unauthorized horse trails is often greatest near a park’s boundary and these provide for other damaging activities, such as motor bike riding, bicycle riding, and rubbish dumping;

• water pollution from horse manure which finds its way into water systems and greatly increases the level of nutrient, bacterial and viral input causing potential health hazards; and

• disturbance of native fauna by the noise of horses and riders, the disturbance of vegetation, and the fragmentation of habitat.’  

In the face of law and evidence, it is deeply disturbing that the NSW Government has displayed a degree of unconcern with the details of its deregulation of access to parks. A small horse riding lobby group should not redefine wilderness recreation based on horse riding being an appropriate ‘self-reliant’ activity, while being entirely reliant of horse power. It seems that in the last two decades the NPWS has become a Government policy lap dog, rather than a trusted public servant and national parks defender. 

In another move, the NPWS adopted a bicycle access policy in 2011 that allows for the construction of new exclusive mountain bike tracks that divert yet more of its limited management resources into an inappropriate track forming activity that damages park values. Like horse riding, the diversion of funds from nature conservation to bicycle track construction is unjustified as riders have adequate legal access in the form of thousands of kilometres of roads in parks, including an almost countless number of management roads that lie outside declared wilderness areas. 

A 2010 NPWS Discussion Paper extolled the virtues of “mountain bike experiences” including: 

• Cross-country, which may include “technical challenges” suiting a wide range of skill levels;

• All-mountain riding that can include “advanced technical challenges and steeper hill sections”;

• Downhill riding – “predominantly downhill”;

• Free riding involving riding tracks and/or “stunts that require more skill and technical features than cross-country”;

• Dirt jumping involving hopping over shaped mounds ... “to become airborne”;

• Trials involving “hopping and jumping bikes over obstacles”. 

Nowhere is there mention of mountain bike riding involving the enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage. At the moment, visitor facilities in national parks are provided to enable enjoyment and appreciation of natural and cultural heritage, apart from the ski resort areas and a limited number of passive picnic grounds. The facilities proposed for mountain bike riders are of a different order all together, as these track facilities are primarily for the exclusive use by bike riders and their sport, and thus should fail the compatibility test in the national park management principles laid down in the Act. The major land forming with earth moving equipment necessary to develop trails for mountain bike sport has no nexus with nature conservation.

At the very least, a careful consideration of cycling and horse riding proposals should be through park management plans that can minimise adverse impacts on public safety, park assets, the appropriate enjoyment of the park by other members of public, and the conservation of the heritage values of the reserve. Such regulation of use through a management plan is now under attack through memoranda of understanding with various high-impact user groups.
Even more worrying is that the Shooters and Fishers Party gave notice of a Wilderness and National Parks and Wildlife Legislation Amendment (Management) Bill introduced in September 2012. The content of this legislation is yet to be disclosed, but according to party spokesperson, Robert Brown, MLC it will open up wilderness areas in NSW to mountain bike and horse riding (Brown, R., 2012). If the Shooters and Fishers Party are successful with this legislation, they may be disappointed with the subsequent electoral support from these politically unaligned riders. A party that wants to log and graze national parks is unlikely to secure votes from city-based middle classes.

After generations of bipartisan support for nature-focused national parks policy, different policy ideas are developing that are business and visitor focused. The O'Farrell Government has conceded NSW national parks to hunters. The Government are also taking steps to reduce public involvement in planning, local government and environmental protection. The proposed deregulated planning laws will be more pro-growth and pro-development, and will facilitate development within national parks.

A thin green line exists between national parks and developed land, not just on a map, but now also in politics. At stake is nature-focused park management of national parks, wilderness and other protected lands. The introduction of gun culture into protected areas seeks to change the community’s relationship to wildlife, and through that use, the perception of how natural areas can be managed to benefit visitors.

The political pressures on national parks are becoming greater. Seeing national parks as yet another resource for consumption is being opposed. Conservationists must work smarter, not harder, if we are to claim back bipartisan support for nature and national parks.

The way ahead

The wild places of New South Wales, like those in Victoria and Queensland, are suffering from the redistribution of power away from those parts of the community and government interested in nature conservation toward those with an interest in hunting, resource extraction and property development. This change is being expressed mainly through deregulation the so-called ‘cutting of green tape’, through skilful use of media communications by the big end of town, including the TTF, and in the advertising by outfitters of mountain bike riders, off road vehicle users and horse riders.

In these circumstances, conservationists must resist simply talking amongst themselves and tolerating the deregulation and adverse changes to conservation policy. More effective responses include engaging with the public to promote existing low-impact opportunities that permit everyone to enjoy our wonderful national parks and wilderness areas.

Others will need to undertake non-violent direct action. Such steps will alienate environmentalists from the seat of political power and, in consequence, government funding, but such steps are likely to be necessary if such hunting and resort development in national parks are to be stopped. Politicians detest high profile protests where the respectable middle classes are arrested defending a public asset, like national parks.

The very last thing politicians want to see, however, is conservation advocates engaging with the public regarding their concerns and the public through their letters and other representations then encouraging the Government to intelligently address these issues. So not every group needs to staff the barricades, march down Macquarie Street or organise non-violent action to stop shooting in national parks.

There is much that could be done to enhance both visitation and visitor enjoyment through improved promotion of our parks, including publication of more informative materials which provide information
on the geology, flora and fauna of the parks, and reasons for their protection. We need to point out that existing national park marketing has failed to effectively promote, package and present the latent potential of existing good quality, basic visitor facilities. Environment groups may need to prepare pilot materials to explain how park visitor opportunities can be enjoyed by all without destroying wilderness areas.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service should focus on promoting and upgrading its underutilised park facilities, rather than speculate in new controversial high-end expensive private developments for a niche market. Unlike the “cargo-cult” approach of providing high-end private developments, better presentation of low-impact park facilities will increase revenue to the regional communities that adjoin national parks. Off-park accommodation and other services will always best support local economies, while avoiding or minimising impacts on national parks.

Instead of spending money on building mountain bike trails, exclusive hideaway resorts, fancy glamour camps, and monitoring the degradation caused by horse riding through wilderness, resources should be spent in promotion of park values and how best to enjoy them. This would encourage more visitors to enjoy parks for their intrinsic value, rather than encourage and facilitate those users who want to engage in environmentally damaging activities.

Citizens of NSW should be proud of the fact that it has one of the best national parks estates in the world. Conservationists need to inspire public pride and affection towards these wonderful areas, even while contemplating non-violent direct action to stop park abuse. We need to celebrate our achievements, such as the events held last September for the 80th anniversary of the saving of Blue Forest and the Gumtree Songline Walk to celebrate World Heritage listing for the Blue Mountains National Parks in 2001.

Young people need to be encouraged to make their first steps into the bush, such as through Wyn Jones' Golden Gumtree Postal Run, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Blue Mountains National Park (gazetted 25th September 1959).

Conservationist groups also need to work more closely with responsible eco-tourism businesses and eco-tourism Australia. "Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation". Ecotourism Australia believes that the ultimate definition of ecotourism is compliance with the core criteria stated within the Eco Certification Program (2012). Certainly this eco-tourism organisation and businesses with Advanced Eco-tourism Certification are ensuring nature-focused visitor management is consistent with the ideals of environment group policy.

Meanwhile wilderness, in administrative reality, remains the cornerstone of the NSW park management system that has so far successfully defended nature from the spoiling forces of our modern society. It has helped to secure a higher priority for nature-focused management. Wilderness is also a powerful belief that respects the rights of nature and those of indigenous people.

The wilderness idea has done much to protect nature and there is much more to be done. Conservationists should promote wilderness and help provide more people with life changing experiences, especially the young. Visiting wilderness is a humbling experience that can provide visitors with the inspiration to work for a more environmentally sustainable society.

If conservationists stick to the basics and communicate these to the public, then the national parks idea and wilderness will weather the current storm and be the stronger for it. We must steadfastly resolve that nothing the TTF, the Shooters and Fishers Party or sporting outfitters can do shall ever damage the wilderness and national parks idea in Australia.
Countering the attack on NSW wilderness and protected areas

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